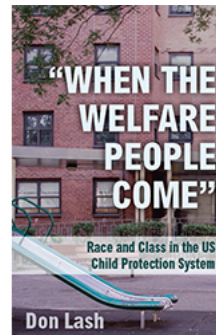


THE INDEPENDENT

## A Folk Festival Grows in Brooklyn

RON OLESKO Apr 12

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Brooklyn, New York has undergone a renaissance during the past 20 years, and the accompanying issue of gentrification has been well documented in news reports in recent years. After young professionals snapped up real estate deals and a new culture of hipsters emerged, Brooklyn has become the epicenter for some of the finest restaurants, microbreweries, artisanal donut shops, and countless boutiques in the five boroughs of New York City. Brooklyn has also become the heart for one of the most vibrant and creative... and yes, the hippest folk music scene in the nation.

From Friday April 17 through Sunday April 19, the 7th Annual Brooklyn Folk Festival will take up residence at St. Ann and the Holy Trinity Church at 157 Montague Street (between Clinton and Henry) in Brooklyn Heights. Headliners include Jerron “Blind Boy” Paxton, Michael Hurley , Jeffrey Lewis & Peter Stampfel, Naomi Shelton & The Gospel Queens, and Frank Fairfield among many others. The festival will also feature numerous workshops, films, jam sessions and the infamous “banjo toss” in the Gowanus Canal.

Like Brooklyn’s famous tree from the classic Betty Smith novel, this festival is growing larger each year. In her novel, the metaphorical tree survived and thrived despite efforts to remove it. Just as the tree survived, folk music has survived years of the mainstream press has tried to downplay the interest in the styles, but folk music remains vibrant, and events like the Brooklyn Folk Festival are reasons why.

Unlike a number of contemporary festivals that use the words “Folk Music” in very broad fashion, the Brooklyn Folk Festival Festival is built on a foundation of traditional music – you won’t find many naval-gazing singer-songwriters in this bunch.

Started six years ago by Eli Smith, the Brooklyn Folk Festival was conceived as a way to showcase the local talent that was emerging from the Brooklyn folk scene. Smith is a banjo player, writer, and promoter of folk music. His unique podcast,



The Down Home Radio Show, (www.downhomeradio.com) has spotlight on the traditional styles. He calls the music he plays “Down Home Music” as he feels the

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words “folk music” and “traditional” have become overused to the point where it doesn’t give a true picture of the music being made. Eli is also a member of the stringband, The Down Hill Strugglers, who were featured on the soundtrack to the Coen Brothers’ film Inside Llewyn Davis.

In 2009 with the folk scene blossoming, Smith was also taking note of several venues that were booking local artists playing traditional, “down home” styles. Smith teamed up with Geoff and Lynette Wiley who ran the Jalopy Theater in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn to present the first Brooklyn Folk Festival in 2009.

The Jalopy Theater proved to be the perfect partner for the annual festival. The Jalopy opened in 2006 to sparse crowds but by 2009 it had become one of the main centers of folk music activity in the city. The original idea of Jalopy was to promote a gathering of artists which included painters, woodworkers and musicians. Over time, the music portion became the focus as folk musicians from around the city recognized the potential of the intimate space. Although Red Hook is one of the outermost sections of Brooklyn, it became the unlikely focal point for this new folk revival. The area maintains a neighborhood feel, and it has developed a loyal audience. More than just a place to present concerts, Jalopy also offers classes where you can learn to play a banjo, guitar, fiddle and other instruments; workshops for more advanced techniques often led by traveling artists with extensive experience; a storefront where you can purchase instruments and perhaps most importantly - workshops for children. What better way to perpetuate folk music? The venue itself provides an inviting and intimate space for patrons to listen and discuss music with the artists.

Since selling out the first festival in 2009, the event has grown and continues to sell out venues each year. This year’s festival will be held in the largest location to date and over the course of three days they will present 30 bands, a variety of workshops, a family-style square dance, jam sessions, film screenings, vendors and contests. The mainstage will be framed by the historic and stunning William Jay Bolton designed stained glass windows of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity Church.

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festival begins on Friday evening April 17 at 8pm when blues guitarist and old-time fiddler Jackson Lynch takes the stage. The rest of the evening will feature of blend of locals and traveling artists that represent the broad spectrum of music that makes up this folk scene. From Rhode Island comes Horse-Eyed Men, brothers Noah and Dylan Harley who describe their music as “disgruntled Americana and country.” Jazz and ragtime pianist Terry Waldo and his Rum

House Band will take the stage on Thursday night with “Blind Boy” Paxton and Feral Foster – two of the prominent folk artists arising from this new Brooklyn

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scene. Feral plays host to a regularly scheduled “Roots and Ruckus” session at Jalopy.

The legendary Michael Hurley will be appearing on Friday night. A mainstay of the 60s and 70s Greenwich Village folk scene, Michael is now living in Oregon but is returning “home” for the fest. Michael’s highly entertaining music was often considered to be on the fringe of the folk scene, but he recorded some classic albums including a legendary collaboration with the Holy Modal Rounders. It is fitting to see Michael as part of the Brooklyn Folk Festival as he encompasses the spirit of individuality and creativity that is prevalent in the current folk Brooklyn folk scene.

Michael Hurley is one of a handful of established artists who have been embraced by the Brooklyn folk scene and will be appearing at the festival. Attending folk events in Brooklyn, one notices that there is a mix of generations attending these shows and it may be one of the few folk scenes in the country where the average age is closer to college years instead of retirement years. The “veterans” who appear regularly at the Brooklyn Folk Festival and places like Jalopy are not only respected, but welcomed into the fold. It is not unusual to see these artists playing together and learning from each other. Peter Stampfel, a member of the aforementioned Holy Modal Rounders, has appeared regularly at Jalopy with his “Ether Frolic Mob” where they push the boundaries and shake the cobwebs out of the classics. At this year’s Brooklyn Folk Festival, Peter will be appearing on Sunday evening with Jefferey Lewis, a local musician and comic book artist/writer who has recorded with Peter.

While it is still rather young and growing, the Brooklyn folk scene has put the spotlight on a number of outstanding musicians, some who are now gaining national attention. At the top of the list is Jerron “Blind Boy” Paxton. Any given performance from Jerron might include several old timey songs, country blues, early jazz and pop songs from the ’20s and ’30s, Irish jigs and more. I find it hard to believe that Jerron is only 25 years old. The wealth of knowledge and the sheer number of songs that he knows is staggering. His virtuosity on instruments like the guitar, banjo and piano along with his vocal styling and stage presence makes each time he takes the stage an event. He dresses and uses the vernacular of the old-time country blues songsters with a dash of hokum that takes the audience back to a different era. While his stage persona may be an act, the “Blind Boy” moniker is not.





Jerron has a congenital condition that rendered him totally blind. His vision might be limited, but his musical skills, encyclopedic knowledge and gift of

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patter help paint a vivid picture of another time and place. Born in South Central Los Angeles, Jerron is from Cajun descent and is part African-American and Native American, and he is also an Orthodox Jew. He discovered music through his parents and especially his grandparents and was exposed to a variety of styles. He picked up his first traditional instrument at the age of 12 and was absorbing a variety of traditional music styles. After graduating high school, he began attending Marist College before transferring to the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in Greenwich Village. He eventually dropped out as he had more of a desire to study early jazz and traditional music as opposed to the contemporary styles. He is a rising “star” in folk circles and an artist that you do not want to miss.

Other locals who will be performing at this year’s festival include the Hoodoo Honeydrippers, the Whiskey Spitters, the Four O’Clock Flowers, Brotherhood of the Jug Band Blues, Wyndham Baird and others. Artists traveling into town for the event include Bruce Molsky, Frank Fairfield, the Cactus Blossoms and Suzy and Eric Thompson.

Another crowd favorite is Naomi Shelton and the Gospel Queens. Naomi grew up in Alabama where she sang with her sisters in church. Naomi came to NYC in early 1960s and she found a gig singing soul/funk music at a Brooklyn night club. She would be rediscovered in the 1990s by Daptone Records who would release recordings of Naomi Shelton and the Gospel Queens. Their energetic and inspiring music will be heard on Saturday evening at this year’s festival.

With a “neighborhood” as diverse and culturally rich as Brooklyn, you can be certain that the folk music scene reflects the various styles and cultures that can be found in the borough. At this years festival you will hear Middle and Near Eastern music from Souren Baronian and Band, Mande Balafon music from Guinea as performed by Famoro Dioubate, Klezmer/Jewish music of Belarus from Litvakus as well as Hawaiian/tropical music by King Isto’s Tropical String Band.

This year’s festival will include a workshop titled Treasures from the Archive Roadshow produced by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress collections and celebrating the centennial of the birth of folklorist Alan Lomax. This workshop will take place on Sunday afternoon at 4:15pm that will be moderated by Folklife Center folklorist Nancy Groce. Panelists will include the Down Hill Strugglers, New Lost City Rambler /folklorist/photographer John Cohen, folklorist and musician Ernie Vega, and Grammy Award-winning musician and folklorist Art Rosenbaum. They will perform songs and tunes that



can be found in the various collections of the American Folklife Center. There are plans to have The Roadshow tour the country this year, appearing at festivals,

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performing arts centers, colleges and universities. The Roadshow will also feature museum-style panel display with more information about the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Also on Sunday, there will be screenings of rare folk music films created by Alan Lomax.

There are a number of other interesting workshops scheduled over the course of the weekend including one called Folk City!, a look at the folk revival that took hold in 1930s in NYC. This workshop will be led by curator Stephen Petrus, from the Museum of the City of New York. The Museum is planning an exhibition on the folk revival that will open in June.

One of the most unique events is the infamous Banjo Toss. A procession will begin in front of the church on Sunday afternoon to the canal where participants will see who can toss a banjo the furthest in the Gowanus Canal. Yes, there are some who may find this offensive, but it is done with reverence and humor and could only happen in Brooklyn!

It may be cliché, but there is truly something for everyone at the Brooklyn Folk Festival. With the larger space, it is hopeful that more people will come to check out this amazing folk scene that is taking place. It may seem like a local secret right now, but I suspect that the great music being played in Brooklyn is due to be discovered by audiences across the country. For more information, visit their website at [www.brooklynfolkfest.com](http://www.brooklynfolkfest.com).

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